

Doing Justice to The Richness of Personality: Introduction to the Special Issue

“New Approaches to The Measurement of Personality:

Translational Thoughts to Applied, Educational, and Clinical Settings”

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Abstract

Personality and its assessment are growth areas in the psychological literature and are important in applied practice. In the decades since personality re-emerged as a viable scientific construct following the person-situation debate, we have learned much about the nature and full breadth of personality traits as well as refined methods for the assessment of personality characteristics. Indeed, the personality assessment literature currently is vibrant and now intersects with numerous other disciplines, including traditional psychometrics, developmental psychology and psychopathology, clinical psychology, neuroscience, industrial-organizational psychology, educational and social psychology. This growth in the personality assessment literature inspired us to organize an expert meeting on personality assessment. This two-day event—which was held in Oostduinkerke (Belgium) in September 2016—brought together junior and senior personality assessment researchers as well as a number of methodologists from around the world and focused on sharing modern viewpoints on personality assessment from a wide diversity of perspectives. Following the meeting, we envisioned this special issue, including papers from meeting attendees addressing topics that emerged from the discussion sessions and are the result of fruitful and often new collaborations. Although the papers were invited, all were subjected to critical peer review and underwent revisions prior to their publication here. In what follows, the overall rationale for the present special issue and the connection between the different papers will be outlined from an integrative perspective.

Keywords: personality assessment

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In the past decades, personality research increasingly has shown that the historical belief in the stable nature of personality (Costa & McCrae, 1994) is not sufficient to cover all qualities of human traits. Indeed, beyond an overall stable dispositional tendency, personality also reflects dynamic features that fluctuate across time and context. Considerable evidence suggests that these fluctuations cannot be considered as error but reflect meaningful variation of relevance to those with a fundamental interest in understanding the entire spectrum of trait behavior. As outlined in Hofmans et al. (this issue), this finding has been challenging to personality researchers who tried to explore innovative strategies for assessing the richness of personality constructs across the life course. Wright et al. (this issue) for instance propose an inventive data-analytical strategy that is especially useful to model both between- and within-level variation of personality in intensive longitudinal data. This data-analytic progress addresses the increasing need to incorporate both between- and within-level assessments in methodological designs, in order to unravel their relative share of observed personality variance. Whereas Hofmans and colleagues provide some overall guidelines and areas of concern in putting together such designs, Lang and colleagues (this issue) specifically point to the ability of originally intended between-level Likert type scores to generate within-person information based upon a sophisticated IRT tree approach. Although this IRT-method requires further exploration in terms of validity, it is a promising avenue to advance our knowledge related to within-person trait fluctuations without the necessity of assembling demanding within-person data.

In an effort to move the dynamic assessment of personality from single-item measures of personality or adaptations of DSM-criteria for personality disorders towards the assessment of a reliable and comprehensive measure for use in diary designs, Zimmermann and

colleagues (2018), developed a bottom-up personality diary measure with the unique feature of integrating both trait and situational assessment. Such contextualized assessment of personality is in line with the established theory of trait-activation (Tett & Burnett, 2003), and can also be understood as a phenomenon that is applicable throughout the developmental process of personality pathology (De Fruyt & De Clercq, 2014; Herpertz & Bertsch, 2014). Future research with this measure may reveal the extent to which the trait-item pool actually incorporates the bipolarity of the overall structure of personality pathology, as argued by Widiger & Crego (this issue). As an alternative, more specific contextualized assessments for various constellations of personality (pathology) may also be a viable way to explore how situations and trait manifestations are connected and jointly shape outcomes of a person's (mal)adaptation. Overall, by incorporating the context in which traits, either adaptive or maladaptive, are activated or become manifest, a tremendous source of useful information for coaching or treatment is uncovered. Ziegler and colleagues (this issue) go a step further, proposing a new measure tapping specific dimensions of situational perception. Interestingly, these situational perception constructs perform as dispositional constructs, suggesting that the way people perceive their environment reflects a consistent personal process that adds to the traditional Big Five personality traits. This assumption needs to be further examined, but aligns with the rationale of Zimmermann et al. (2018), and is a stimulating approach to further our understanding of the mechanism behind the trait-activation principle.

Creative thinking about personality measurement also sheds new light on basic psychometric issues that may impact upon the reliability and validity of personality ratings. Of considerable interest here are scale characteristics such as the number and keying of items, the number of response options in the commonly used Likert type rating scales, response tendencies such as faking, and method-specific features that influence self-ratings. Building upon thorough empirical procedures, Simms and colleagues (this issue) provide specific

guidelines regarding the optimal number of response options when using Likert type scales, hence providing a scientific basis for an assessment issue that often is overlooked. Relatedly, Abrahams and colleagues (this issue) propose some strategies to deal with Likert-type scoring problems that have been established within the educational context but are readily transferable to clinical or applied settings. At the construct level, Soto and John (this issue) provide a set of empirically-based suggestions for selecting the optimal number of items to measure a specific trait. Bensch and colleagues (this issue) empirically address the nature of faking on personality questionnaires, a response tendency that can be difficult to detect but that is important to consider in high-stakes applied testing contexts. Others options for dealing with response tendencies and optimizing assessment procedures are outlined by Abrahams and colleagues (this issue). Although these authors have not specifically elaborated these ideas from a strict personality approach but rather from a socio-emotional skill framework, their suggestions are directly applicable to personality given that traits and socio-emotional skills share some important features. The work of Tackett and colleagues (this issue) directly connects with these suggestions, as these authors propose a sophisticated data-analytical model to analyze multi-method/multi-situation data in order to increase the validity of personality assessment.

Finally, Suzuki et al. (this issue) bridge the personality assessment literature into the neuroscience area. More specifically they report on research attempting to link event-related potentials (ERPs)—which are scalp-recorded measures of brain activity—with trait measures of self-reported personality. Although the effects generally were small in magnitude, they nonetheless provide a baseline against which to compare future work in this area. Improving our understanding of the connections between personality and constructs/methods rooted in neuroscience will be an invaluable part of helping understand the biological processes underlying individual differences in personality.

Taken together, these papers all include either new conceptual ideas, new methods, or new data-analytical approaches that should be helpful to personality researchers in the identification of true construct variance. Despite this growth of refined methods and knowledge related to personality assessment science, however, the field must continue to keep track of the relevance of empirical findings. For example, the small effects presented in the Suzuki et al. (this issue) paper on the link between personality and neuroscience, make clear that much is left to learn about the exact ways personality is reflected in momentary measures of brainwave activity. The field is in need of replication studies in this regard, including multi-method designs that will enable to examine whether different neuroscience measurements yield converging, complimentary, or divergent patterns of result to those presented here. Similarly, the measurement papers in this special issue try to bring clarity to some basic issues facing scale developers (e.g., the nature and number of response options to include, how to properly consider faking, etc.), but the results of these papers are far from conclusive. Future work is needed examining the proposed strategies outlined in the present special issue, and broadening this work towards other samples and using various assessment contexts.

From an overarching applied perspective, the most tempting objective of the current special issue was to translate the empirical insights into their clinical or applied value, in a way that may persuade psychological assessment training programs to also incorporate contemporary methods and perspectives described in the scientific literature of psychological assessment. A recent survey in this regard (Mihura, Roy, & Graceffo, 2016) has for example shown that notwithstanding the increasing emphasis on personality tests in clinical psychology doctoral programs, almost all practice-focused programs continue to focus on relatively old and mainly self-report based assessment technology, despite the availability of newer evidence-based methods that more squarely reflect modern evidence-

based conceptualizations of personality and psychopathology. This finding clearly suggests that researchers should try harder to translate their empirical findings into practical and accessible guidelines for clinicians. It is our hope that the present group of dedicated personality researchers has succeeded in this attempt, and laid a foundation for a next generation of research on personality that makes a clear case for its clinical utility.

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